

Russia Shows the World What Doesn't Work

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Karl Marx in his 1848 “Communist Manifesto” wrote, “The specter is wandering around Europe, the specter of communism.” According to Marx, the communist revolution was to take place in the most advanced countries of Europe. So how did that specter overtake Russia in 1917?

Before the beginning of World War I, Russia had become the second-fastest growing economy in the world and had been on the winning side in that war, until it unilaterally withdrew after the Bolshevik Revolution. To be sure, Russia had widespread poverty, flawed governance and largely feudal inequalities that were aggravated by war — all of which Vladimir Lenin called the “objective preconditions of the revolution.” At the same time, however, the country might have overcome these conditions, if it were not for what Lenin coined the “subjective preconditions”: the purposeful subversive activities of the Bolshevik Party that he led.

The well-organized party of professional revolutionaries came to power in Russia under

Marxist slogans. The idea — unlike that of Nazism, the other totalitarian regime of the 20th century — was not evil. On the contrary, its ideological basis was appealing to many Russians — end the cruel exploitation of the masses by a small class of wealthy capitalists and aristocrats, let working people own the land and factories and give everyone access to education, health care and culture. For Russians, with their eternal soul-searching and aspiration for ultimate truth, the revolution's ideals of justice and equality seemed to promise answers to eternal questions.

Alas, instead there were four years of bloody civil war, which together with hunger and illness took away about 18 million lives. After this, Stalin's regime ruined agriculture through forced collectivization, chopped off whole layers of society that were seen as destructive for building communism and installed fear and hypocrisy for decades.

Unlike Americans, Russians do not joyfully trace their families' histories back to their roots, since many of their family lines were interrupted in 1917. What's more, in the Soviet days it was dangerous to look back. The enormous tragedy caused by the Bolshevik Revolution could not be offset by any of its achievements, such as a more egalitarian society, the abolition of illiteracy, rights for women and quantum leaps in science and heavy industry.

Marx's contribution to economic and political history, class struggle and labor theory was akin to Charles Darwin's contribution to biology or Sigmund Freud's to psychology. They were all founders of new schools of thought. Freud was the first to draw attention to the subconscious and the significance of sex, even if he was a bit off with the sex-related defining features of human behavior that he proposed or the specific treatments he prescribed. Marx was the first to focus on the role of economic factors in history and to propose the theory of a stage-by-stage development of society — from tribes to feudalism to capitalism and, finally, to communism. Yet his dangerous prescription of revolution and unrealistic promise of communism as the most progressive society — with no government or police and where people would work as much as they want to and consume as much as they needed — caused real havoc in Russia.

It is too bad for Russia that Marx did not foresee the opportunity that was already dawning within the capitalist economies — to create through technological revolution, efficiency and high productivity enough goods for the entire society, including a large and stable middle class. In the middle of the 19th century, Marx believed that the impoverishment of the working class was inevitable. Half a century later, Lenin also failed to see that the technical revolution was already creating surplus goods in the West that were available and affordable for most citizens. At the same time, however, higher wages and better social benefits did not automatically appear. Rather, they were the result of the long struggle of the working class and labor unions against management abuse. Oddly enough, the working class in the West benefitted from the Bolshevik Revolution in the sense that Western politicians and business leaders took unilateral steps to improve the labor conditions of workers to avert similar social unrest — or even revolutions — in their own countries.

Marx believed that the laborers — the proletariat — were the main production force and the most advanced class. He belittled the role of the manager, the owner and intellectual involvement in creating added value by organizing processes and inventing machinery. Marx and later Lenin thought that the proletariat was the “avant-garde” that would eventually

install a new, just order. In reality, of course, these poor laborers were the most unprepared class for ruling the country because of their lack of experience of ownership and control. In their name, and in the absence of institutions, a small group of power-hungry, tyrannical opportunists seized power.

The Russian 19th-century philosopher and writer Pyotr Chaadayev once said Russia's historical role is to teach the world a great lesson after failing miserably in one of its great social, political or economic experiments so that other countries don't repeat Russia's mistakes. This country tried out a theory that had been invented in Europe and washed itself with blood before most other countries rightfully decided to take paths other than the Marxist-Leninist one.

Like 90 percent of the Russian population, I did not celebrate National Unity Day on Friday. We should over and over again, with tears of penitence, apologize to the Poles because they — more than any other nationality, except, of course, Russians themselves — suffered most from Stalin's bloody regime.

United or not, it is time to collect the stones. German philosopher Immanuel Kant said life's two biggest wonders are the starry sky and the moral feeling in a man. Russian poet Alexander Blok wrote in addressing his words to Russia: "Let them mislead you and deceive you, you will not vanish, will not die."

Any talk of the decreased human potential and spoiled Russian gene pool caused by the losses of the 20th century is unscientific. Since so many people were killed or expelled from the country in the 20th century, we must be thankful that people have retained their spirit and compassion. We did not succeed in obtaining a guilty verdict against the Communist Party during a court case in the first half of the 1990s, and, thus, we must learn to live with them.

But we must bury Lenin, as well as rebury others whose graves remain on Red Square. That old, haunting specter should be locked in the closet — or better, chased out of Russia, just like in Russian Orthodox churches, where they chant and chase out the evil spirit during baptism ceremonies.

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